

South Dakota State University  
**Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional  
Repository and Information Exchange**

---

Extension Extra

SDSU Extension

---

5-1-1998

## Play and the Child

Scott Magnuson-Martinson  
*South Dakota State University*

Arlinda Nauman  
*South Dakota State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension\\_extra](http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_extra)

---

### Recommended Citation

Magnuson-Martinson, Scott and Nauman, Arlinda, "Play and the Child" (1998). *Extension Extra*. Paper 434.  
[http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension\\_extra/434](http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_extra/434)

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the SDSU Extension at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Extension Extra by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact [michael.biondo@sdstate.edu](mailto:michael.biondo@sdstate.edu).



# Extension Extra

ExEx 14051

May 1998

Family Life

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES / SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY / USDA

## play and the child

*revised by Scott Magnuson-Martinson, Ph.D., Extension family life specialist,  
from South Dakota Extension Fact Sheet 768, Play,  
originated by Arlinda Nauman, Ph.D., former Extension human development specialist,  
SDSU Extension Family and Consumer Sciences*

To you it looks just as it always does: a family room, a bedroom, or the backyard. However, it's incredibly messy--because there's a child in it--and toys are scattered everywhere.

To the child, it's no ordinary room or yard. It's a fairyland court complete with royalty, a construction site (looks more like demolition to you), an ancient plain--complete with dinosaurs--or a spacecraft cockpit. The child is at play and totally involved!

Your chairs that are arranged into a pilot's console, the stacks of blocks that are a building, all the other things that are dragged out and spread about are absolutely necessary where they are. Wails of protest will erupt if you choose the wrong time to intrude.

### What toys do . . .

Playthings, whatever they may be, are as important to children's growth and development as textbooks and a computer will be when they go to school. Children use toys to make sense of their world. Toys help them to understand what is happening to and around them.

Toys give children a chance to be "boss" over some part of their environment. For once, they are in charge--pushing things here and there. They are in control.

Toys introduce children to the world of choice. We know that the ability to choose between alternatives helps determine "success" in the adult world. Choice is just as important in the children's world, and it helps prepare them for the many alternatives they will face as adults. "What will I play with today?" becomes "What occupation will I choose?" tomorrow.

Toys inject novelty into children's lives. They may help to show that learning and problem-solving can be fun.

Toys aid physical development. This development ranges from crawling after a rattle to mastering the dribble and hard shot necessary to score a goal in soccer.

Toys are an outlet for emotional expression. This can be verbal--as in crooning to a beanie baby, or physical--as in banging on pot lids with a spoon. Working off negative feelings by scolding Elmo or setting up a thundering din on the lids is as necessary as expressing happier emotions.

Toys provide for social contacts. Jason learns to include Jennifer in his make-believe, and they learn that playing together can be as much fun as playing alone. Keesha learns to give up her favorite car for a time, while Jamil learns to be a bit more assertive. Children need to learn to work things out together without too much interference from you, and toys often provide the forum for this.

Toys help develop hobbies and suggest occupations. Children may not think of it this way, but you probably know of people who have a lifelong devotion to photography because of an outdated instamatic that they were given as a child. There's at least one veterinarian who still cherishes memories of his first toy rabbit.

### Realistic or unstructured?

Toys provide the opportunity for two activities which may seem to be opposite: 1) practicing "rational" adult behavior, and 2) exploring the secret imagination. Emotionally healthy adults actually have to be able to balance these against each other. Indeed, modern adults must have well-trained skills, AND must be imaginative

and creative in their use. Sometimes they must rely on personal creativity during their leisure hours in order to cope with work days which may be repetitious and routine.

The best toys to help children achieve a blend of rational and imaginative behavior usually depend on a child's particular stage of development (which may or may not be linked with chronological age). When children are attempting to gain control over their world, they are helped best by realistic toys. A toy baby buggy can be pushed, or a simple Nintendo can be played, and there's a sense of accomplishment as well as an improvement in eye-hand coordination.

Once children have gained some sense of control, then unstructured toys are often better, because they are now ready to develop their imaginations. Remember the different things an old household appliance box was to you . . . a cave . . . a house . . . a spaceship?

At any time, children may jump between realistic and unstructured toys. The tiny car of an older child may need to mimic the life-size model--right down to styling and vanity license plates. Or a child may hang onto a favorite toy for years after you think it should have been outgrown. You never can tell with children, but they will grow up, and it will seem all too soon!

## **Why children play . . .**

Children play because it's fun. It's fun to feel the wood in a set of building blocks, to arrange the different colors as you stack them up, and to knock them down again.

Children also play because they want to be like their parents. They may tend the "baby doll" or hammer like they've seen mom or dad do. These kids are playing the roles of the most important people in their lives--their parents!

Children also play because they are curious. They want to learn--and learning takes place--even if it's in a puddle, or in not so carefully removing every item in a purse. Concerned parents or caregivers may not approve of some of this, but they should remember that the child is learning--even if it's only how mud feels between the toes! Sometimes children simply want to learn the limits of your patience.

## **How you can help . . .**

Children want to play alone some of the time, but they may still want you to be near. Sometimes they need a gentle nudge, or the stage set, for them to get started in play alone or with others. Even in the world of play, adult involvement is important.

Children who play regularly, both alone and with others, are more likely to achieve the highest levels of creativity as adults. Adults can open the doors of a child's imagination by providing appropriate materials and time to try out new ideas. Here are some things you can do to make play more meaningful for a child:

### **Read everything you can about child development.**

Try to learn the stages of physical, mental, and emotional development, children's capabilities at each stage, and what different toys and play equipment fit these stages. BUT don't be surprised if a child rejects the "perfect" toy in favor of another choice. Let kids be themselves--unless it hurts others.

### **Play along at times.**

Let them alone at others. Take a genuine interest in children's play. They may often want you to be near and to notice and approve. However, you should encourage them to play without supervision or validation at times. This is good preparation for adulthood.

### **Don't unduly force.**

"Experts" may indicate that children should be doing certain things by certain ages, but if they lack the skills necessary to successfully participate in that activity, pushing them to do it sets them up for failure. Allow children to hold themselves back from what their peers are doing and watch for the time being. The late bloomers usually catch up in time.

### **Overlook the first clumsiness or mess.**

Beginners at anything are rarely efficient. They don't know how to do it, yet you need to show patience while practice makes less imperfect. Even if children are making a mess, toys shouldn't be yanked away or activities interrupted without fair warning unless someone is in danger. You may need to set some limits--especially for messy activities--or distract them to something that is less frustrating for you. Try to give children a time warning with a positive promise: "Put your toys away before I come back upstairs so we can go outside."

### **Provide a place for toy storage.**

A corner of the playroom or of the children's bedroom equipped with some storage shelves may be just the place to keep toys. Get them in the habit of taking care of these, because they will need to organize things as adults. Both you and the children can look for pictures of the toys to tape on the shelves. This will help them get toys in the right place.

### **Provide variety.**

Each day children should have a combination of different types of play. Over the course of a week they should engage in some quiet play, active play, creative play, group play, alone play, and make-believe play. If the child



stays at home with a parent or other caregiver, make a special effort to give the child some group play time. If the children are in child care, make a special effort to allow each child some alone play time. Many children seem to benefit most from group experiences with age-peers, but they also can benefit from appropriate play with younger or older children.

### **Provide fewer well-made toys rather than many cheap ones.**

Think how short your temper will be if you have to search all over town for a replacement for a well-loved but cheaply-made toy that broke after little use. Well-built toys also are likely to be safer. While they may cost more initially, constantly replacing cheap toys may cost even more in the long-run. Also, children often love cast off things that cost you nothing, like old clothes and that appliance box.

Also, by periodically taking toys out of circulation for a while, you can reduce the likelihood that the children will get tired of these and want to break them for the fun of it.

### **Don't show children "how to" too much.**

Especially when they're drawing or painting, allow children to develop their own creative abilities. Ask them to tell you about their pictures, rather than saying, "What is that supposed to be?"

### **Don't discriminate by sex.**

Give kids equal access to whatever toys they want—even if it makes you a bit uncomfortable. Some boys may want to play with dolls rather than "action figures." What matters most is that all children have the opportunity to develop all their talents. Lots of opportunities now will help prepare these children to cope with the variety of situations that come in later life, which is the essence of productive play.

## **Toys for different ages . . .**

Toys are most useful to children when they are age-appropriate. So, it's important to know what kids can do at various ages and stages. Many manufacturers help adults out by indicating the relevant ages on the toy's package.

### **New babies . . .**

Up to a couple of months old, most babies do not really use toys. Their eyes don't focus all that well, they have some difficulty identifying sounds, and their control over their head, limbs, and fingers is limited. They tend to be most interested in eating, sleeping, and being kept warm and dry. They may, however, like toys that you manipulate for them--such as mobiles or music boxes.

Don't give infants anything they could get in their mouths and swallow.

### **Three months to a year . . .**

When babies get into this age range, they will like soft, brightly-colored toys that they can learn to hold, drop, and pick up again. These toys provide exercise and interest. Growing babies like toys that are chewable--everything goes into their mouths--especially when they're teething. Most babies are quite attentive to musical toys. As they approach the middle to end of this period, they generally are starting to get around for themselves. Toys and play that encourage them to crawl and take their first steps are desirable.

### **Toddlers . . .**

Children at this stage need all the practice they can get in moving. Exercise is good for the big muscles in the arms and legs. They also are very curious. They rattle, shake, open, and shut things. They like to fill and empty pails, repeatedly. They like toy blocks. They need ACTION toys, which should be large, lightweight, and simple.

Don't confuse what appeals to you with what the child wants and needs. Make sure toys are safe for the limited coordination these kids have. Toys they can push or pull are especially attractive during this stage.

### **Ages three to four . . .**

Preschoolers are usually VERY high-energy. They love action toys that they can throw, bounce, stomp, or kick. Their coordination is much better than toddlers, and so is their imagination. They like to play make-believe and toys that encourage this are often helpful to them. Many also like creative crafts involving beads and string. Stuffed animals feel good to hug and nurture.

### **Children five years old . . .**

Kids of this age generally like everything they liked earlier, but they do things more completely and with greater ease. So, their play gets more complicated--otherwise they get bored. Creative play is a new challenge every day. Once they have mastered something, they want to move onto the next, more difficult toy or game. Dramatic play becomes more important at this age, as does day dreaming. Also, even if they have not previously been in child care or preschool, children of this age tend to get more social and like toys that contribute to group play. Simple board games may be appropriate for them.

### **Six year olds . . .**

Even for those who have long been in child care or preschool, this is a big step, with new friends and new teachers. They experience heightened levels of competition with other children. Action, creative, dramatic, and social toys--all the different types of toys available--are useful to them, providing they are age-appropriate. Simple computer games come into play.

### **Ages seven and eight . . .**

Children of these ages generally need the range of toys that is appropriate for six-year-olds, but these should be more detailed and elaborate. Multi-role games are good.

### **Nine years and older . . .**

Children of this age and beyond may no longer appreciate the word "toy." They want to think of themselves as adults. Even if they have toys, they may want these referred to as their "things." Usually, they will want an even larger range of things than younger kids--often the things that adults have. Nintendo and the like are VERY big by these ages.

Adult caregivers--especially parents--tend to be the focus of children's lives up until the teen years. The next most important part of their lives is play. Adults can help to make this play more meaningful and productive. Observing children while they play and thinking about some of the purpose it serves may help you to help them.

## **References**

Abrams, B.W. and N.A. Kauffmann. 1990. Toys for Early Childhood Development: Selection Guidelines for Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Gregson, B. 1990. Take Part Art: Collaborative Art Projects. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Van Horn, J. 1995. Let's Play (Better Kid Care Satellite Conference). College Park: Penn State University Extension.

----- 1997. A Good Four-Letter Word--PLAY (Better Kid Care Satellite Conference). College Park: Penn State University Extension.



Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the USDA. Mylo A. Hellickson, Director of CES, SDSU, Brookings. South Dakota State University is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer (Male/Female) and offers all benefits, services, education and employment opportunities without regard for ancestry, age, race, citizenship, color, creed, religion, gender, disability, national origin, sexual preference, or Vietnam Era veteran status.

150 copies printed by CES at a cost of 13 cents each. May 1998.